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General

AS IT WAS

AS IT WAS

Photographs of the New England States from the Farm Security Administration Files

This exhibition could not have been possible without the enthusiasm and active participation of many people. We would like to take this opportunity to gratefully acknowledge the time and effort of the following for their contributions, with special thanks to Mark Greenberg for acting as Guest Curator and Tom Black for the visual design: Harry Anderson, Susan Avery, F.O. Bailey, Co., Inc., Charles Batcher, David Becker, Constance Carroll, C. C. Church, Richard Collins, John Eide, Konnilyn Feig, Lynn Franklin, Bertha Higgins, Dorothy Howard, Constance Labbe, Richard Lacasse, Alan Mast, Robert McKibben, N. Edd Miller, Jo-Anna Moore, Gordon Pickel, Paul Rodrigue, SITES, Jansen String, Robin Tara, Mara Ubans, Robert Wilson, William Younger.

Presented by the University of Maine at Portland-Gorham Art Gallery from September 20 through October 28, 1974, with the financial assistance of the Maine State Commission on the Arts and Humanities, the Students and Alumni of the University of Maine at Portland-Gorham, and in cooperation with the Library of Congress and the Museum of Modern Art.

Juris Ubans
Director, Art Gallery
University of Maine
at Portland-Gorham

The 12 pictures in this portfolio were chosen from an exhibition held at the University of Maine at Portland-Gorham in 1974, entitled AS IT WAS—Photographs of the New England States from the Farm Security Administration Files. It, in turn, was chosen from a large and remarkable photographic project carried out by a government agency, the Farm Security Administration, between 1935 and 1941.[1] The purpose of the project was to document the agricultural havoc caused by the Depression, and the progress made in overcoming it. However, the files eventually came to represent something even more significant: a near-total portrayal of rural America.

The project, which was headed by Roy Stryker and included such photographers as Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Carl Mydans, Arthur Rothstein, and Jack Delano, was fortunate in avoiding the limitations usually imposed on government work (and also the inevitable results). Few of the predictable, contrived lifeless products of bureaucracy can be found. The photographs remain vital and successful in intent, visual and otherwise. That this should be so, in an effort of such size and duration, can only be explained by attributing to Stryker and his photographers such qualities as dedication, honesty, and inspiration.

How large are the files? Well, go to the Library of Congress Print Room, where they are now.[2] Start with any drawer, each containing a few hundred cardboard-mounted prints. Look at them as fast as you can; go from file to file, row to row of file cabinets. Then, after a week or so (looking for 8 hours a day) you'll have some idea of the FSA files.[3]

Pictures of a nation in agony, faces destitute of hope, wasted land, abandoned farms, dust storms—these are the usual images of the Depression. Surely, they must be represented in any accounting of the period. Yet also present was an America continuing to survive—at work, occasionally at ease, and often optimistic. The FSA photographers showed this, too.

For their intent towards their subject was positive. Even in the bleakest of the photographs, the photographers have not fallen into an all-too-easy despair. Nor did they manipulate and exploit the obvious inevitable suffering. Rather, there is an honest attempt to avoid neither the worst, as the photographers saw it, nor the best, when it could be found. Criticism and irony (but not mockery) were indispensible tools. Most important was compassion.

It's quite an education. You'll have seen photographs of the South by Ben Shahn, made with beautiful concern and tenderness for his subject, whether black or white, young or aged, poor or poorer. That Shahn, much better known as a painter and graphic artist, was able to see so well may not be surprising. But the way he saw, its elegance, grace and wholeness, is still amazing. Lange's famous photographs of migrant workers in the West, sometimes tap a deep core of human warmth. And there are Walker Evans' photographs of Alabama, in which hopeless squalor is delineated with crystalline purity. Jack Delano's work in New England continues the long tradition of humanism in art, of which photography has been an important part since 1839.[4]

These photographs, then, for the most part record their makers' reactions to human situations. They are "documentary." Clearly, they are remarkable, and stand as both a permanent rebuke to our heedlessness and a permanent

tribute to our capacity to endure.

The project originated with Rexford Guy Tugwell, Professor of Economics at Columbia University, who in 1933 was recruited as part of Roosevelt's original "Brain Trust." He became the Assistant Secretary, then the Undersecretary of Agriculture; and in 1935, Director of the Resettlement Administration.

This agency was established to provide farmers and migrant workers with relief in the form of agricultural advice, distribution of high-quality seed, and loans of equipment and small sums of money. The program gradually expanded and was ultimately incorporated into the Farm Security Administration.

From the first, Tugwell had a strong sense of the historical uniqueness of the period. He later said that "it seemed important to record the incredible events of those years and the best way was to photograph them. Roy Stryker was asked to organize the work."[5]

Tugwell's choice was another of the many pieces of inspiration which surrounded the project. Stryker was visually oriented, a brilliant teacher, experienced in the use of photographs for documentation. Tugwell, while at Columbia, had been interested in a book, the Pictorial Source Book Of American Agriculture, which Stryker compiled.

Stryker had also seen work by Lewis Hine, the American sociologist-photographer and Eugene Atget, the great photographer of Paris. These had convinced him of the photograph's ability to "vivify fact." In 1922 he used photographs, as well as other visual aids, to teach economics.[6] Stryker had both the necessary socio-economic training and sensitivity to photographs. He was right for his job. Locating photographers who would be right for theirs was his first necessity.

Arthur Rothstein was hired in July, 1935. He had worked with Stryker at Columbia, and stayed with the FSA project until 1940. Ben Shahn (who had been painting murals in Washington, D.C.) and Walker Evans (who had been taking photographs for another government agency) were also hired in 1935. They were followed by Dorothea Lange and John Collier; and Paul Carter did some early project work in Maine.

Stryker described the project as "a visual education." He got more from it, he insisted, than did the photographers.[7] They, for their part, have left some impressions of him. For Rothstein, he was "a catalyst, irritant and stimulant," a "photographer's psychoanalyst."[8] For Lange, he had the "ability to transmit a sense of freedom plus responsibility."[9] For Mydans, he was "a fine teacher" (once Mydans received a day-long crash course in cotton, about which Stryker found him insufficiently informed; for Stryker insisted that his photographers do their economic, geographical, and sociological homework) who could "generate enthusiasm and interest in the world...especially America...'America' was his most commonly repeated word."[10]

Stryker has declared that, at the outset of the project, he had no particular plan. Eventually, he decided to attempt a comprehensive portrayal of America. Photographers in the field received frequent "bulletins" about gaps in the files. The FSA, of course, was interested primarily in rural America. Still, Thomas Garver managed to collect enough exclusively urban material for a 1968 exhibition (Just Before the War, shown at the Newport Harbor Art Museum and

the Library of Congress)."[11]

The catalogue for Just Before the War includes some of Stryker's "bulletins." He wanted pictures involving ice cream cones, cokes and hot dogs, watermelons, Main Street, Courthouse Square, traffic jams, "Fill 'er up," a cop and a speeder, women on a porch visiting with women in a street, people waiting for a bus, crap games, auctions, "Dine and Dance," fishing, county fairs, etc.[12] Other memos suggest themes for photographic series: places where men or women meet, people other people (rural and urban, from diverse economic groups) know, or behavior and appearance on and off the job. By way of such documents, Stryker's ambition takes on urgent creative life.

The Second World War confronted America with new problems and priorities. Government-sponsored photography continued, but under the auspices and stringent control of the Office of War Information. While some interesting work appears in these later files (including the photograph on the cover of this portfolio), the photographers had lost Stryker's inspired tutelage and, by and large, their freedom.

I have called these photographs "documentary"—and so did those who made them.[13] Photographic labels have a way of coming (figuratively as well as literally) unglued. Yet this label, affixed as a declaration of intent by the photographers themselves, deserves further consideration.

Documents supply facts, authenticate happenings. Their content is informational. For a document to supply fact, or authenticate happening, however, its context must be known; the viewer must know how to "read" it.

At one end of the photographic spectrum are pictures with entirely informational content. The purpose of these photographs is illustrative or didactic—the emotional part of the photographs is unimportant; the feelings of the photographer are hidden or obscured.

At the other end are photographs which may seem to contain nothing but feeling. The "information" (if any) seems unimportant. Those of us who feel we have seen such photographs must have considered their makers' intents as central and unmistakable, although indefinable in words. Words couldn't capture the entire vision of the photograph, but could at best suggest it.

Neither type of photograph is exactly common, if it does exist at all. Pictures, even uninspiring ones, are usually suggestive beyond words, if only by association. And few photographers can shake themselves so free of verbal thinking and preconception that they bring forth unequivocal, emotionally intense images. However, documentary photographs belong to neither extreme.

Documentary photographs are tools and agents of social concern. They assume our knowledge of event, custom, and convention (and to some extent, our feelings about them). To this, they add new knowledge, some of it expressible in words. Yet documentary photographs are not emotionless portrayers of fact—the best speak strongly to our emotions. Their language is of necessity a combination of universal human emotion and specific social situation. When the balance is apt, they fulfill one possible definition of art.

Documentary photographs are not unbiased. Their makers try their best to move us to their point of view, or point of feeling. To do this, all the emotionally expressive tools of photography, as well as motif and metaphor, are at the

documentary photographer's disposal. But no documentary photograph can serve art alone.

This anti-aestheticism should never be counted as a disadvantage. By not concentrating on art-for-art's-sake, on sheer novelty and innovation, and by being concerned with human values, documentary photographers have often succeeded in creating images which are sophisticated, new, and even beautiful beyond those produced by direct aesthetic confrontation. Moreover, their images are unobtainable by any other means.[14]

Documentary photographs are usually meant to accompany a text. Questions many people ask about all kinds of photographs ("Who is it?", "When was it taken?", "What's it supposed to show?") are legitimate when applied to documentary photographs. Part of a documentary photographer's intent is expressible in words. It is the photographer's job to find adequate visual language to express this intent, and if the context is obscured or disappears altogether, photographs are never seen in precisely the same way by maker and viewer. A hundred years or a year or even a day, and the understanding of context has altered. Fashion, events, an era's elusive atmosphere all contribute to the sense of a photograph. Like any artist, the photographer must be critically alert to this danger. If communication is his aim, he must make his work as clear, unequivocal, and lasting as possible.

Nonetheless, many photographs have become anonymous images, their makers, locations, or dates unknown. When a documentary photograph is detached from its context, it may lose its essential significance. Once valuable as a social or historical witness, it is now mute. The photographer failed to find the appropriate visual language or was hedged in by his subject (which may be the same thing). Because not visually autonomous, his work is permanently devalued. On the other hand, the opposite may happen. Deprived of its original association, a documentary photograph may acquire new visual significance, universal and particular crossing and re-crossing. When an image is so rich in vision, source and conscious intent may be quite transcended, and metaphor magically transforms itself into symbol.

The FSA photographs demonstrate both processes. The viewer undoubtedly misinterprets some. Others have attained to the universal, the symbolic. But they are on the whole still "readable" as American documents—historically of enormous value and socially intriguing. For in them we see the source of much that we have become, the continuation of what we have been, and, it may be, the spirit of what we will become again.

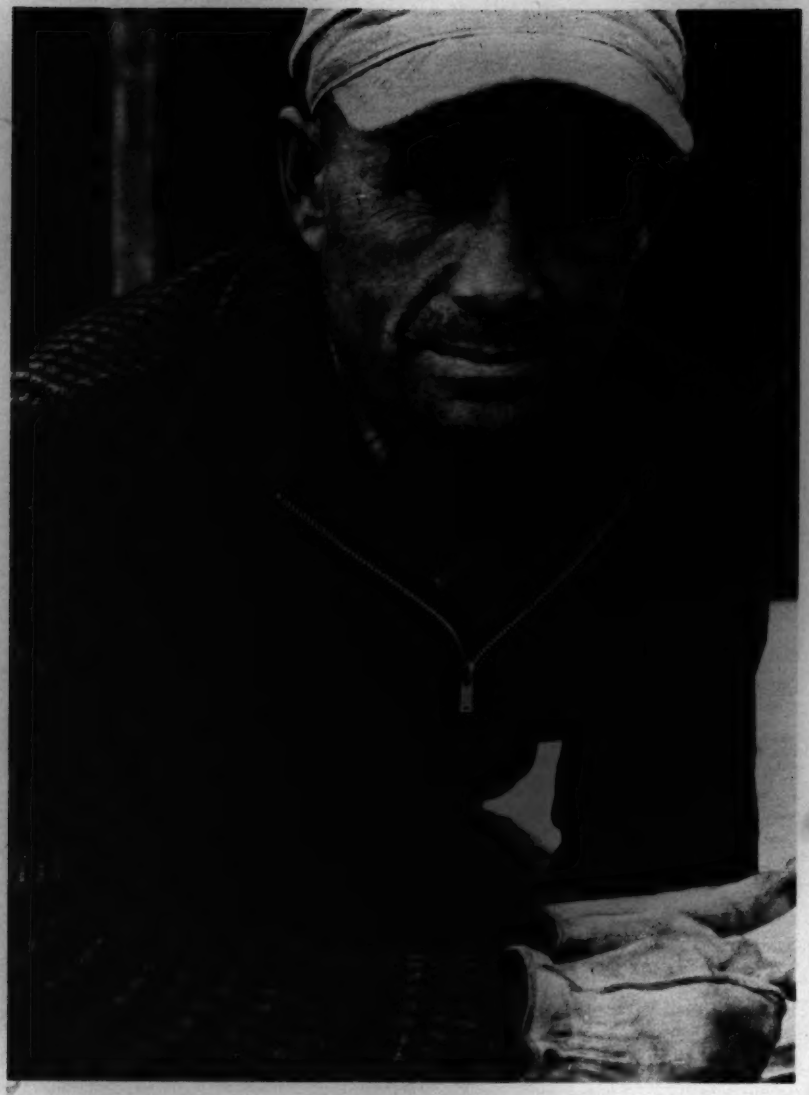
Mark Greenberg

1. As is pointed out below, this project led to another carried out by the Office of War Information after 1941. 2. Because the negatives are on highly-inflammable nitrocellulose based film, they are kept outside city limits. 3. There are probably tens of thousands of negatives which have never been printed. 4. The year Daguerre announced his process. 5. The Bitter Years, 1962, Museum of Modern Art, New York. 6. Just Before the War, 1968, October House, New York. 7. "Focus on Stryker," Popular Photography, XXXI:3, Sept., 1962, pp. 64. 8. Just Before the War. 9. "Focus on Stryker," p. 62. 10. Ibid, p. 64–65. 11. "Urban" is defined in the introduction by Thomas Garver as "the hand of man maintaining control over the forces of nature." Just Before the War. 12. Ibid. 13. For example, see "Documentary Photography" by Dorothea Lange (1940) in Photographers on Photography, edited by N. Lyons, 1966, Prentice Hall, Englewood, p. 67–68. 14. For a thorough discussion of this as it relates to painting see Ben Shahn, The Shape of Content (New York: Vintage, 1957), especially p. 62–63.

1. John Collier	8/42	Caribou, Me.	LC-USF34-83567-C	
2.			83571-C	
3.		Aroostook, Me.	83602-C	
4.			83611-C	
5.		Caribou, Me.	83617-C	
6.		Ft. Kent, Me.	83649-C	
7.			83657-C	
8.			83666-C	
9.			83696-C	
10.		Aroostook, Me.	83722-C	
11.		Ft. Kent, Me.	83730-C	
12.	5/43		LC-USW34-30696-E	
13.			30099-E	
14.			30103-E	
15.		Ashland, Me.	30609-E	
16.	5/43	Ashland, Me.	LC-USW34-30623-E	COVER
17.		Brown Co., Me.	30646-E	
18.		Ashland, Me.	30682-C	
19. Jack Delano	10/40	Presque Isle, Me.	LC-USF33-20678-MI	
20.		Caribou, Me.	20681-M3	
21.		Lille, Me.	20682-M1	
22.	11/40	Norwich, Conn.	20704-M2	
23.			20721-M3	
24.	10/40	Soldier Pond, Me.	20801-M4	
25.	8/41	Bellows Falls, Vt.	21092-M1	
26.	9/41	Rutland, Vt.	LC-USF33-21106-M2	PLATE 5
27.			21110-M2	
28.	8/41		21149-M2	
29.	9/41	Tunbridge, Vt.	21170-M3	
30.			21199-M2	
31.	9/41	Tunbridge, Vt.	LC-USF33-21205-M3	PLATE 1
32.			21209-M4	
33.	9/40	Suffield, Conn.	LC-USF34-41555-D	
34.	10/40	Presque Isle, Me.	41723-D	
35.			41735-D	
36.			41744-D	
37.			41766-D	
38.			41788-D	
39.		Caribou, Me.	41789-D	
40.		Presque Isle, Me.	41790-D	
41.	10/40	Presque Isle, Me.	LC-USF34-41820-D	PLATE 4
42.		Caribou, Me.	41864-D	
43.			41874-D	
44.		Van Buren, Me.	42025-D	
45.		Ft. Kent, Me.	42039-D	
46.		St. David, Me.	42051-D	
47.		New Sweden, Me.	42085-D	
48.		Lille, Me.	42090-D	
49.	10/40	Van Buren, Me.	LC-USF34-42102-D	PLATE 9
50.		Soldier Pond, Me.	42110-D	
51.		Caribou, Me.	42132-D	
52.	10/40	New Sweden, Me.	LC-USF342-42183-A	
53.	11/40	Canterbury, Conn.	LC-USF34-42206-D	
54.		Colchester, Conn.	42295-D	
55.	10/40	Houlton, Me.	42397-E	

56. Jack Delano	10/40	Houlton, Me.	LC-USF34-42399-E	
57.		Taftville, Conn.	42552-D	
58.		Bath, Me.	42589-D	
59.	12/40		42609-D	
60.			42634-D	
61.			42645-D	
62.			42646-D	
63.		Quincy, Mass.	42663-D	
64.		Johnstown, R.I.	42747-D	
65.	12/40	Newport, R.I.	LC-USF34-42763-D	PLATE 11
66.	1/41	New Bedford, Mass.	42918-D	
67.	1/41	Lowell, Mass.	LC-USF34-42940-D	PLATE 6
68.	8/41	Springfield, Vt.	45148-D	
69.		Tunmouth, Vt.	45449-D	
70.		Castleton, Vt.	LC-USF342-46087-A	
71. Fenno Jacobs	10/42	Southington, Conn.	LC-USW34-41865-D	
72. Russel Lee	10/39	Berlin, Conn.	LC-USF33-12442-M2	
73.		Meriden, Conn.	12444-M2	
74.	10/39	Northampton, Mass.	LC-USF33-12450-M1	PLATE 8
75.		Windsor Locks, Conn.	12452-M2	
76.	8/39	Manchester, Vt.	LC-USF34-34397-D	
77. Edwin Locke	9/37	Concord, Mass.	LC-USF33-4243-M4	
78.		Manchester, N.H.	4253-M3	
79.			4258-M1	
80.			4269-M4	
81.	9/37	Manchester, N.H.	LC-USF33-4294-M1	PLATE 10
82.			4300-M5	
83.		Bridgewater, Vt.	4305-M5	
84.		Manchester, N.H.	4313-M2	
85.	6/37	Proctor, Vt.	LC-USF342-15580-A	
86.	9/36	Shelburne, N.H.	15583-A	
87. Herbert Mayer	8/39	Boothbay, Me.	LC-USF34-15855-E	
88. Carl Mydans	8/36	Morrisville, Vt.	LC-USF33-788-M2	PLATE 12
89.	9/36	Hardwick, Vt.	816-M5	
90.		Amoskeag, N.H.	824-M1	
91.	8/36	Lowell, Vt.	LC-USF34-6912-D	
92.	9/36	Manchester, N.H.	6946-D	
93. Gordon Parks	6/43	New Britain, Conn.	LC-USW34-34305-C	PLATE 3
94. Walter Payton	10/40	Plymouth, Mass.	LC-USF33-15566-M3	
95. Edwin Rosskam	8/40	Provincetown, Mass.	LC-USF33-5081-M1	
96.			LC-USF34-12739-D	
97.		Truro, Mass.	12744-D	
98. Arthur Rothstein	9/37	Windsor County, Vt.	LC-USF33-2590-M1	
99.		Vermont St. Fair	2596-M4	
100.		Rockland, Me.	2622-M4	
101.			2626-M5	
102.	9/37	Orange County, Vt.	LC-USF34-25769-C	PLATE 7
103.		Rockland, Me.	25853-C	
104.			25854-C	
105. Marion Post Wolcott	3/40	Woodstock, Vt.	LC-USF33-30759-M1	PLATE 9
106.			30769-M3	
107.		Franconia, N.H.	30854-M3	
108.	5/41	Hartford, Conn.	31257-M3	
109.	3/40	Brattleboro, Vt.	LC-USF34-53046-D	
110.		Fryeburg, Me.	53437-D	

Bold—Photographs included in folio



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